

Iran's Simmering Rebellion
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Misaugh Parsa, a Dartmouth professor, has published a fascinating book, *Democracy In Iran: Why it Failed and How it Might Succeed* (2016). He sought answers to why countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, both military dictatorships, accepted representative democracy in the late 20th century, while Iran's many attempts at democratization always failed. This comparison is interesting because all three of these countries once enjoyed a comparable level of economic development. Taiwan and South Korea have soared ahead economically under their democracies whereas Iran is barely above water.

What was it about Taiwan and South Korea that produced this difference? Parsa notes that the military dictators had no particular ideology but had decided that economic development must precede political development. Both countries managed, through intelligent direction, to thrive and in doing so, produced an educated middle class.

Iran, under a similar trajectory from the 1950s through 1979, under Shah Mohammad Pahlavi, also emphasized economic development before political freedom. Petroleum wealth helped produce a prospering middle class. However, too much dependence on oil revenues has damaged more than one country. Taiwan and South Korea had no petroleum wealth; they thrived through hard work.

Iran had another problem: a large sector of peasants and new working class were still enmeshed in Iran's Shiite sect. The clerics, although without political power, owned 50 percent of agricultural land and were feudal landlords to their peasants. When the Shah attempted to modernize that sector through land reform, the government bought the land at the value declared by the landowners (for tax purposes) and then sold it to the peasants with 30-year loans.

Iran's aristocratic families, which owned the other 50 percent, were given an opportunity to exchange agricultural land for a bit of Tehran real estate. They did very well indeed. The clerics, however, did not have this option and instead went into rebellion. Muslim rebellions of the 1960s were put down by the government, but flared up again in the 1970s. The clerics led bloody demonstrations after the government gave women the right to vote and run for parliament. They initially lost, but kept up the pressure underground, just waiting for other disgruntled sectors to join them.

In the 1979 Revolution, the revolutionary sectors (students, intellectuals, working class) expected a genuine western-style socialist democracy. The Ayatollah Khomeini and his inner circle of clerics professed the same desire, but the moment the revolution succeeded in ousting the Shah, Ayatollah Khomeini showed his true colors.

Despite resistance from a few of the other Ayatollahs, he established a theocratic state that denied basic social and political rights to the population. The clergy were elevated into governing and Khomeini became the unquestionable dictator, the Supreme Leader. The clergy's former allies in the revolution were kicked out or jailed, with many executed in a swift reign of terror. Freedoms granted before 1979 were revoked: no drinking alcohol, gender separation in public spaces, veiling of women, resurrection of polygamy, banning music, and even walking dogs in public parks became crimes punishable by whipping and jail. Amnesty International estimates 5,000 executions in 1988 alone, in addition to lashings, amputations, beheading, and stonings.

Iranians have attempted democratic revolutions since 1905, but all of them failed. The 1979 democratic revolution was snatched by Khomeini, a leader who cared more for Islam than for Iran. In recent years, there have been more attempts at revolt, the latest being the Green Revolution of 2009, which was savagely put down. However, a simmering rebellion is apparent throughout the country today. Women are defying the dress code with headscarves shrinking and outer clothing shorter and tighter. Everyone who can afford it drinks alcohol at house parties; young people date and even have sex before marriage; satellite dishes (forbidden) appear everywhere, giving owners access to free-world news and entertainment. Jokes about the clerics make the rounds. Iran's future is not Islamic.

The clerical power circle has grown smaller and their members obscenely wealthy. They have nowhere to run and will not give up power without blood. The next revolution will succeed only if it is organized to include all disillusioned sectors. Intellectuals alone cannot prevail.

686 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.com.